



'The countryside and its people cannot be taken for granted'

On his 70th birthday, The Prince of Wales reflects on what he has learnt in three score years and ten and urges us to do everything we can to sustain our landscape and those who work so hard to maintain and enhance it

I WAS astonished when the Editor of this august publication asked me, yet again, to take over the editorship of this edition. I thought he had had enough the last time... However, he told me that the intention was to mark my 70th birthday, which, of course, is extremely kind of him, but is nevertheless associated with the alarming realisation that I have reached the biblical threshold of three score years and ten, with all the scars that go with it.

Yet even as we grow older, the countryside that is such a special part of our lives somehow manages to adapt to the march of time, changing with the generations as much as with the seasons. So perhaps this is a good moment to reflect on how rural areas have changed over the course of 70 years. What have we learnt in that time and what might the future hold?

In 1948, the country was still recovering from the debilitating effects of the Second World War, including a tragic loss of young, able-bodied people, from all walks of life. Rationing was still in place and it was clear that recovery would take a long time. The challenge for the countryside and land managers was to increase food production as rapidly as possible, while also building many more homes.

Artificial fertilisers and pesticides, which had been known about for decades, but had not been used on a large scale, became widely available to boost yields and reduce food prices. Given the needs and knowledge of the time, it is perhaps no surprise that there was little or no monitoring of any wider effects on the environment. Indeed, it was only when a young American ecologist and writer, Rachel Carson, somewhat reluctantly, published



her book *Silent Spring* in 1962 that the extraordinary hazards of this approach began to receive attention.

Tragically, the impacts of the worst of those pesticides, such as DDT, are still damaging marine mammals and other wildlife decades after they were finally banned.

The drive for 'efficiency' led to many changes in our countryside. The impacts on the health of soil and wildlife were accompanied by changes to the

fabric and culture of the countryside. Farms were amalgamated, hedges torn out, ponds and wetlands drained, rivers dredged and canalised and, in upland areas, incentives were provided for blanket plantation forestry, even in areas of great scenic beauty.

In time, social changes followed. Village shops, pubs and schools found it increasingly hard to remain viable, particularly following the closure of more than 4,000 miles

of mainly rural railway lines. Two of these I remember so well as a child in Norfolk and Aberdeenshire. Unfortunately, country bus routes that might have replaced them generally failed to prosper.

As a teenager, and someone who noticed what was going on around me, as well as being fortunate to be able to explore the fields of Sandringham, the uplands around Balmoral and the ancient woodland of Windsor Great Park, I remember witnessing all this environmental destruction and minding deeply about its ultimate impact. Could the ends possibly justify the means and what would we be left with?

Fortunately, the British countryside and its people are extraordinarily resilient. Some hard lessons have had to be learnt, some of the worst excesses are being undone ➤

‘Could we establish the United Kingdom as the most environmentally friendly food producer?’



and many splendid initiatives are under way to provide help where it is needed most. But, as I have remarked in these pages before, our countryside is a rich tapestry and, as with any other tapestry, the unravelling of even a single thread puts the whole fabric under threat.

Perhaps the clearest way to understand how much is at stake, and what we might want to do as a result, is to try to think ahead to what our grandchildren will want and need. Seventy years ago, some aspects of our lives today would have been quite simply unimaginable. Others, such as the pleasures of a walk in the country, good food from local farms, traditional craftsmanship, the beauty of landscape, gardens and Nature, and a sense of community, have changed little. So the question is how can we ensure that those same life-enhancing, timeless opportunities are there when future generations look for them?

Every year, I try to find time to visit the Lake District and, in March, I had the great pleasure of marking the designation of the whole area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Looking out over Derwentwater towards Borrowdale, at a landscape of incomparable beauty, was a wonderful reminder of just how fortunate we are in this country to have inherited such natural riches.

The Lake District we experience today is a consequence of more than a thousand years of human activity, with successive generations of farmers working in harmony with the natural world, rearing cattle and native breeds of sheep in ways that have shaped and enhanced the spectacular mountain landscape. Yet it is something of a triumph that this traditional land use continues, in the face of so many severe social, economic and environmental pressures.

The natural beauty of those mountains, lakes and valleys has been shaped by farming, just as much as farming practices have been shaped by the need to extract livelihoods from a harsh and testing environment. This is not an automated system, but one created and maintained by the daily actions of hill farmers to sustain their families, flocks and, in turn, their communities.

There are now about 1,000 farming businesses in the Lake District and it is those families—because the majority are indeed family farms—who are at the heart of securing the future of this latest World Heritage Site. In 17 years of annual visits, ever since the devastation of foot-and-mouth disease, I have come to know local people and understand these unique farming communities. I am continually struck by their fortitude and ability to overcome trials whether of family tragedy, pestilence or floods. But we cannot take the survival of these very

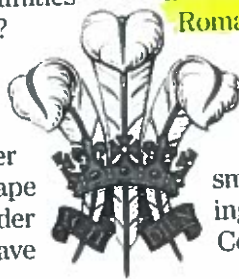
special communities for granted. Here, as elsewhere in our countryside, we need to understand that successful rural businesses are a prerequisite to delivering benefits for the public.

Every year, I am fortunate enough to meet a large number of the rural businesses that, alongside farming, are the mainstay of our countryside. This year's highlights included visiting Honiton's first Gate to Plate event, which saw this market town in East Devon showcasing some marvellous local crafts, food and drink. The High Street was full of stalls, with more than 60 businesses taking part, from Eat the Smoke to Georgie Porgie's Puddings and the Powderkeg Brewery. Business was clearly brisk and it was encouraging to see a market town fulfilling its ancient function so admirably, just as it has since Roman times.

One of the things I have learnt on my travels is that successful rural enterprises come in all shapes and sizes. In Wiltshire, I saw the Ramsbury Estates diversifying with a gin distillery, smokehouse and micro-brewery, as well as rejuvenating the local pub into a thriving restaurant. And in Cornwall, I saw Finisterre surfwear, established in St Agnes 15 years ago with a grant from my Prince's Trust. With a focus on sustainable fabrics, the company manufactures swimwear from part-recycled fishing nets. It is also trying to resurrect a 100% British supply chain in some products, including the use of wool from Bowmont sheep; a breed it has helped to resurrect in close association with my Campaign for Wool.

In looking to the future of the countryside, these and many other success stories provide encouragement, but training and support systems also need to be in place and working effectively. Housing is, of course, a key requirement and there is a particular problem of finding ways for elderly farmers and farm workers to retire with dignity, in their own community, just as there is to house the new entrants who will provide the future of farming. These issues were discussed at a summit convened by my Prince's Countryside Fund earlier this year, with the aim of understanding the extent of the problem, both now and in the future. Many options are now being explored with other landowners who care about this issue, and I hope more will join us in due course.

It is clear to me that there are huge opportunities to help the countryside and rural people meet the challenges of the future. But we do need to be clear about what we want to achieve, thinking particularly about what will be important to our children and grandchildren. The role



‘The role of the countryside in our national life is too important to be left to chance’



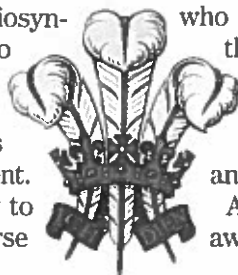
of the countryside, with all its diversity and idiosyncrasies, in our national life is too important to be left to chance.

Everyone will have their own opinion of what is most important, but I wonder whether there is more common ground than is sometimes apparent. My personal conviction is that we should seek to maintain and, where necessary, restore a diverse and well-managed countryside that values the contribution of farmers, and particularly the smaller, family run farms.

Surely it makes sense to build both natural and social capital through, for instance, payments for eco-system services (such as natural flood prevention, carbon sequestration and water catchment management, etc), local food systems, enduring rural communities and a distinct sense of place? This would in turn better support urban areas through food production, and these eco-system services, while providing a place for relaxation and spiritual refreshment.

There is also a pressing need to build understanding, particularly among an increasingly urban population, of how the countryside works and why it is so important. School farms and gardens have an important role to play in reconnecting children with Nature. Equally, we need to make sure that food tells a good story and has an appealing provenance for the consumer. As a relatively small island, I cannot see how our food production could ever compete within the world's commodity markets. Perhaps, though, we could seek to establish the United Kingdom as the most environmentally friendly food producer with a unique 'brand image', as an island offering the highest standards of quality and natural goodness?

Whatever vision we have for the countryside, we need to think carefully about how to make it happen. The countryside and its people are hugely resilient—as everyone



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who works close to Nature needs to be. But it—and they—cannot be taken for granted. We have to find ways to pull the threads together; making the connections, understanding the complications and barriers, and ensuring the right rewards and incentives are in place.

Above all, we need to be aware of becoming carried away by the latest 'fashionable approach'. I have spent the past 40 years of my life trying to warn of the dangers—let alone the waste of money—of losing a vital sense of balance, in so many areas that impact, for example, on the countryside, on the marine environment, and on planning and design of the urban environment. I have now lived long enough to see it all beginning to change—but at what cost? Should we at last recognise the more timeless aspects of our natural and human environments, which need to

be maintained for the benefit of generations yet unborn?

I am not suggesting it will be easy, but we may be the last generation fortunate enough to experience the wonderful people, skills and activities of our countryside, some of which I have tried to highlight in this special edition of COUNTRY LIFE. Each article tells its own story and I do hope you will enjoy them all. I hope you might also reflect, as I do, on just how much the countryside and its people contribute to our national life, and what we can each do to help sustain them.

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